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978-1-107-02421-2 - The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom,
Sagehood and Socrates

René Brouwer

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The present study is an attempt to bring the early Stoic notions of the sage and wisdom to the fore again. To judge by von Arnim's standard collection of the ancient evidence on early Stoicism, *SVF*,¹ the sage as the embodiment of wisdom must have been an important subject for the Stoics. Despite this importance, in modern scholarship the sage has not yet been given comparable attention.² Perhaps von Arnim himself is, at least partly, to blame here. He separated much of the evidence on the stark contrast the Stoics drew between sage and non-sage, in distinct sections devoted to the sage and non-sages, respectively.³ He also omitted quite a few passages that show the Stoics' enthusiasm for their ideal.⁴

A further reason for this study is that interest in the notion of wisdom is on the rise again.⁵ In the Western philosophical tradition this interest has varied considerably. The history of the reception of the Stoic interpretation of wisdom offers an illustration of these changes in popularity. In Antiquity one of the Stoic definitions was so well liked that at some point it was even regarded as commonplace. In the Renaissance this Stoic definition became fashionable again. According to a modern Renaissance scholar, it 'can be found in Salutati and Bruni, in Reuchlin's *Breviloquus vocabularius* and in Elyot's *Governour*,

¹ For the explanation of *sigla* and references see the bibliography (p. 180).

² This is not to say that modern scholarship has completely neglected the Stoic sage. Valuable earlier work was done by Lipsius (1604), Hirzel (1877–83), Deißner (1930), Kerferd (1978), Bénatouil (2005), Vogt (2008), Liu (2009), Togni (2010), Vimercati (2011).

³ See Pohlenz (1904) 933–4.

⁴ See Pohlenz (1904) 936: 'Gern hätte ich es auch gesehen, wenn eine von den Stellen abgedruckt wäre, wo die Stoiker bei der Schilderung ihres Weisen einmal wirklich warm werden, wo man etwas von der Begeisterung merkt, die sie für dieses Ideal empfanden.'

⁵ See e.g. Tiberius and Swartwood (2011).

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in Erasmus, Cardanus, Pontus de Tyard, and Bodin, in every country of Europe and in virtually any year between the end of the fourteenth century and 1600'.⁶ In the early modern period the interest in the Stoic notion of wisdom remained, examples being Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* (1644),⁷ Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677)⁸ and Leibniz's *On the Happy Life* (1676).⁹ In the eighteenth century, however, its popularity started to wane. In this process Kant's rejection of what he called 'worldly wisdom' (*Weltweisheit*), which followed from his influential repositioning of philosophy as the critical investigation of the conditions under which knowledge of nature or moral acts are possible, will surely have played its role.¹⁰

With the renewed contemporary interest in the notion of wisdom, the classical interpretations provide a rich source. Next to the unreflected use of 'wisdom' (*sophia*) as a mastered expertise, as in Homer, who gives the example of a carpenter who has mastered his craft,¹¹ or as attributed to the traditional 'Seven Sages',¹² Plato and Aristotle are among the thinkers who in the fourth century BCE start to develop their own conceptions of wisdom. Plato (c. 429–347) gives a new meaning to the term *philo-sophia*: next to the traditional meaning of philosophy as the 'love of or exercise of wisdom', philosophy gets the meaning of 'desire for wisdom'. In the slipstream of this new meaning, Plato in his *Republic* appears to offer a new meaning of wisdom, too, consisting in the

⁶ Rice (1958) 93.

⁷ *illae [virtutes] purae et sincerae, qui ex sola recti cognitione profluunt, unam et eandem omnes habent naturam, et sub uno sapientiae nomine continentur. quisquis enim firmam et efficacem habet voluntatem recte semper utendi sua ratione, quantum in se est, idque omne quod optimum esse cognoscit exsequendi, revera sapiens est, quantum ex natura sua esse potest* (2–3).

⁸ *laetitia afficimur, eo ad maiorem perfectionem transimus, hic eo est, eo nos magis de natura divina participare necesse est. rebus itaque uti ... viri est sapientis* (IVP45s). See further Wolfson (1934) 2.255–60, Nadler (2007) 230–8.

⁹ *sapientia est perfecta earum rerum quas homo novisse potest scientia, quae et vitae ipsius regula sit, et valetudini conservandae, artibusque omnibus inveniendis inserviat* (636).

¹⁰ See Marquard (1989) 715.

¹¹ Homer, *Iliad* 15.410–13. See further Section 2.4.

¹² On the lists of Seven Sages see Busine (2002), Engels (2010); on their traditional wisdom see Snell (1971) and Althoff and Zeller (2006).

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all-encompassing knowledge of a higher reality, which the philosopher-king ought to possess in order to rule well.¹³ Aristotle (384–322) distinguishes between practical and theoretical wisdom, re-using the traditional term for wisdom but giving it a rather different meaning by defining it explicitly as the theoretical knowledge of first principles and causes.¹⁴ After Plato and Aristotle, from the third century BCE onwards, the Stoics developed the third of the great classical conceptions of wisdom. Like Aristotle, they re-used the traditional term for wisdom but, unlike him, they appear to have built on the unreflected traditional meaning of wisdom as mastered expertise, while putting it to work in their own systematic framework.

In order to show the importance of the notion of wisdom within Stoic thought, as well as the richness of their conception for modern discussions, one of the main topics in this study will be to provide an answer to the obvious question of what the Stoics understood by wisdom. Furthermore, I will discuss how, according to the Stoics, this wisdom can be achieved, how difficult it is to become a sage, and how this difficulty can be explained.

Before introducing these questions in somewhat more detail, it may be useful to set out the assumptions under which this study has been carried out. For a start, one of the main aims has been to offer a reconstruction of the Stoic notion of wisdom and to discern what the Stoics may have been after, rather than to stress any possible inconsistencies. This study is therefore an attempt ‘to understand rather than to undermine’ Stoicism.¹⁵

A related assumption is that Stoicism should principally be investigated as a unified system of thought, rather than as the

¹³ In the ps.-Platonic *Definitions*, a philosophical dictionary containing definitions formulated by members of the Academy in the fourth century BCE, the Platonic definition of wisdom is formulated at 414B as ἐπιστήμη ἀνυπόθετος· ἐπιστήμη τῶν ἀεὶ ὄντων· ἐπιστήμη θεωρητικὴ τῆς τῶν ὄντων αἰτίας (‘non-hypothetical knowledge, knowledge of what always exists, knowledge which contemplates the cause of beings’).

¹⁴ See further Section 1.2.1.

¹⁵ The expression is by Craig (1987) 213, who used it in his splendid account of the ‘activist’ philosophical tradition that emerged on the European continent from the early sixteenth century onwards.

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overarching name given to a movement of thinkers who all held their own sets of doctrines. Under the influence of two late nineteenth-century studies in particular, Hirzel (1882) and Schmekel (1892), much attention has been given to the development of Stoic thought, to the possible neglect of the idea of a set of core doctrines shared by individual Stoics, irrespective of the difference of opinions that certainly existed among them. The developmental aspect was highlighted especially in relation to the Cynic origins of Stoicism, the role of which may well have been exaggerated, as well as in relation to the classification of Stoicism into early, middle and late periods. For reasons of feasibility I will, however, restrict myself in this study to a reconstruction of doctrines of the founders of the Stoic school. Later Stoics can and will be taken into account, in as far as they provide reliable information on the doctrines of the founders of the school.

That brings me to my last assumption. As so little ancient evidence on Stoicism has survived (let alone the writings of the Stoics themselves), we will have to rely on a variety of sources. A simple reference to von Arnim's collection cannot suffice, first because most of the texts as printed by von Arnim have since been re-edited (his collection is after all now more than a hundred years old), and secondly because this collection does not include quite a few of the passages that will be discussed here. For this reason I decided to add most of the Greek (and sometimes Latin) in the footnotes, to give the reader direct access to the texts on which my interpretations are based. Nevertheless, I have still added references to *SVF* (and to other collections of fragments, where I thought it appropriate) for those readers who want to check the immediate contexts of the Greek or the combination of texts as printed in these collections.

As for the structure of this study, in Chapter 1 I will set out the Stoic interpretation of wisdom. There are surely different ways in which our understanding of it can be enhanced. One method would be to offer a systematic overview of the extant passages in which either the sage or the notion of wisdom occurs. Although such an overview is certainly helpful, the

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main drawback is that it suffers from the fortunes of the surviving textual evidence, as with regard to some topics the sage figures prominently, and with regard to others the sage seems to get limited attention only. I therefore want to propose another approach, via a discussion of the two Stoic definitions of wisdom. The two definitions are ‘knowledge of human and divine matters’ and ‘fitting expertise’. Although these definitions may at first sight appear to be formulated in a rather general manner, I submit that by concentrating on the terms in the definitions and the relation between the terms in each definition, a connection with core Stoic doctrines can be made, such that the definitions of wisdom lose their abstract character and a coherent conception of Stoic wisdom can emerge.

In Chapter 2, the central question will be how to become a sage. While most modern scholars tend to pay most of their attention to the long and difficult process of developing ‘reason’,¹⁶ I will focus on the last step in this process, which is crucial for an understanding of the Stoic conception of wisdom. The characteristics of this last step are remarkable: the change to wisdom is not only instantaneous, it is also radical in the sense that it is a transition between two completely opposite states. Perhaps the most remarkable of all these features is that this change, however instantaneous and radical, at first remains unnoticed. As most of these characteristics can be found in the relatively comprehensive but hostile Plutarchean treatise, *Synopsis of the Treatise ‘The Stoics talk More Paradoxically than the Poets’*, I will use this *Synopsis* as the main starting point of my discussion.

In Chapter 3, I will deal with the question of whether the Stoics believed that someone had ever achieved this state of perfection, and in particular whether they took themselves to be sages. I will give an answer to these questions on the basis of a long passage in Sextus Empiricus’ *Against the Professors*. In that passage Sextus Empiricus, as a sceptic a hostile witness against the Stoics, maintains that the Stoics would not claim to

¹⁶ E.g. Rabbow (1914), Hadot (2002) and Sellars (2009).

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be sages. I will assess the reliability of this source against the other available evidence.

In the final Chapter 4, I will explain the sage's rarity by discussing the intellectual settings against which the Stoics developed their notion of wisdom. I will submit that they consciously fashioned themselves as followers of Socrates (469–399), who did not claim wisdom for himself, but nevertheless devoted his life to striving for it, and perhaps even – without him being aware thereof – found it. Against this Socratic background even the Stoic definition of wisdom can be understood as an attempt to make explicit what Socrates had left implicit in various 'dogmatic' assertions, in passages that can be found in Plato's and in Xenophon's texts alike. If this is indeed correct, then an underlying reason for the Stoics to develop their notion of wisdom must have been to give the best possible answer to the question of what Socrates, surely one of the most inspiring figures in the history of Greek or indeed Western philosophy, had been looking for, and what he – as we will see – had perhaps even found.

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CHAPTER I

TWO DEFINITIONS

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will offer an answer to the question of what the Stoics understood by wisdom. As already explained in the Introduction, I will do so by concentrating on two extant Stoic definitions: ‘knowledge of human and divine matters’ and ‘fitting expertise’.

I will start with the best-known definition of wisdom as knowledge of human and divine matters. In fact, it became so well known that it has often been designated a commonplace, with its Stoic character thus played down. Moreover, in some of our sources the definition is actually attributed to Plato. Hence, before I deal with the meaning of the definition, the attribution of the definition to the Stoics will need to be discussed. In Section 1.2.1, then, I aim to show that the definition is firmly Stoic: the Stoics were the first who formulated this definition explicitly, and were thus really the first to whom the definition should be attributed. In Section 1.2.2 I will reconstruct the meaning of the definition by showing that the three elements in it – i.e. knowledge, human matters and divine matters – can be connected to the three parts of philosophical discourse as distinguished by the Stoics – i.e. logic, ethics and physics. I will first discuss the relation between ethics and physics. I will then move on to a discussion of ‘logic’, which the Stoics understood broadly, and which included epistemology as one of its main topics. The Stoics’ two definitions of knowledge will provide a key to an understanding of the interrelatedness of the parts of philosophy or of the elements in the definition of ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*).

In Section 1.3 I will move on to the second definition, wisdom as fitting expertise. I will reconstruct its meaning by dealing first with the two Stoic definitions of expertise, and

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then offer an answer to the question of what it is that makes wisdom an expertise that is fitting.

1.2 The first definition

The first definition of wisdom, ‘knowledge of matters human and divine’, can be found in the so-called *Placita*, a treatise which survived in the works of Plutarch (c. 50–120), and which is now usually taken to be an abridgement of a work by Aëtius,¹ who probably wrote this work in the first century CE.² In the introduction of the treatise, at 874E in the standard pagination of Plutarch’s works (*SVF* 2.35, *LS* 26A, *FDS* 15), the definition occurs in the following context (with my subdivisions added):

The Stoics said that [i] wisdom is knowledge of human and divine matters, and [ii] philosophy exercise of fitting expertise; [iii] the single and supremely fitting expertise is excellence, [iv] and excellences at their most general are three: in nature, in behaviour, in reasoning. [v] For this reason philosophy is also divided into three parts: physical, ethical and logical. [vi] Physical is when we investigate the world and the matters in the world, ethical is that which is occupied with human life, logical is that concerned with reasoning – the last they also call dialectical.³

This condensed piece of writing constitutes our single most important piece of evidence on the Stoic notion of wisdom and the related notions of ‘philosophy’ (*philosophia*), ‘expertise’ (*technē*) and ‘excellence’ (*aretē*). In what follows I will discuss these notions. In Stoicism each of these notions was understood in a specific manner, often going back to the more traditional meaning of the respective terms, but also going beyond their ordinary meaning. We will see that, with regard to philosophy, for example, the Stoics went back to its

¹ This thesis was propounded by Diels (1879) and by and large accepted by Mansfeld and Runia (1997). For some sceptical remarks see e.g. Gourinat (2011). For ease of reference I will below refer to this *epitome* of the treatise as ‘Aëtius’.

² For the dating see Mansfeld and Runia (1997) 319–23, cf. Runia (1996).

³ οἱ μὲν οὖν Στωικοὶ ἔφασαν [i] τὴν μὲν σοφίαν εἶναι θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων ἐπιστήμην, [ii] τὴν δὲ φιλοσοφίαν ἀσκήσιν ἐπιτηδείου τέχνης, [iii] ἐπιτηδείον δ’ εἶναι μίαν καὶ ἀνωτάτω τὴν ἀρετὴν, [iv] ἀρετὰς δὲ τὰς γενικωτάτας τρεῖς, φυσικὴν ἠθικὴν λογικὴν· [v] δι’ ἣν αἰτίαν καὶ τριμερὴς ἔστιν ἡ φιλοσοφία, ἥς τὸ μὲν φυσικὸν τὸ δ’ ἠθικὸν τὸ δὲ λογικόν· [vi] καὶ φυσικὸν μὲν ὅταν περὶ κόσμου ζητῶμεν καὶ τῶν ἐν κόσμῳ, ἠθικὸν δὲ τὸ κατασχολημένον περὶ τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον, λογικὸν δὲ τὸ περὶ τὸν λόγον, ὃ καὶ διαλεκτικὸν καλοῦσιν.

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1.2 The first definition

traditional meaning of ‘love of wisdom’, next to the ‘new’ Platonic meaning of ‘striving for wisdom’, and that they gave a broad application to both ‘expertise’ and ‘excellence’, such that the otherwise standard translations as ‘craft’ and ‘[moral] virtue’ do not properly cover the scope of the Stoic use.

1.2.1 *The attribution*

First, however, a preliminary issue needs to be dealt with – the attribution of the definition to the Stoics. Although accepted by quite a few modern scholars,⁴ it has been seriously questioned in recent times, for three reasons.⁵ First, the definition would simply be a commonplace, a general formula to which most ancient philosophical schools would adhere, and which stands in no particular relationship to the Stoics. In the second place, Cicero, one of our main sources for the definition, often ascribes the definition to the ‘ancients’ (*veteres*), thereby suggesting that the definition had already been formulated before the Stoics. Finally, some later Platonists maintained that the definition went back to Plato, a position that has recently been defended again. As we shall see, none of these reasons can stand a critical examination of the extant evidence.

With regard to the first reason it can indeed be said that *at some point* the definition became so successful that it was simply regarded as a commonplace. For that Philo, Origen or Augustine, or even one of the apocryphal books in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, have good examples on offer.⁶ But, when we take a closer look at the sources, it turns out that the definition is not attributed to other

⁴ See e.g. O’Meara (1951) 173 n. 40, Chadwick (1953) 176 n. 4, Kerferd (1978), Mansfeld (1979) 135 n. 22, Assmann (1991) 23, Dörrie and Baltes (1996) 245, Fiodora and Werner (2007) 17. Cf. Rice (1958) 2: ‘For them [the Stoics] wisdom was not simply the knowledge of divine things only, as it was for Plato and Aristotle, but of both human and divine things.’

⁵ See Männlein-Robert (2002).

⁶ Philo of Alexandria (c. 15 BCE–50 CE), *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.6, 3.43, Origen (c. 184/5 – 254/5), *Against Celsus* 3.72, *Homily on Jeremiah* 8.2, 57.11–12 (on *Jeremiah* 10.12), Augustine (354–430), *On the Trinity* 14.1.3, 4 *Maccabees* 1.16. Cf. e.g. Renehan (1972) 228, Theiler (1982) 131–2, Watanabe (1988) 51–2, Whittaker (1990) 73–4.

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thinkers earlier than the Stoics. In none of our extant sources is the definition of wisdom as knowledge of human and divine matters explicitly attributed to the Presocratic thinkers.⁷ It cannot be found in Plato either, to whom I shall return later on in this section. It is also not in Aristotle's extant works.⁸ What is more, not only is the formula 'knowledge of human and divine matters' absent from his writings, Aristotle also clearly separates knowledge of the divine from knowledge of the human, as for example in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle distinguishes between 'wisdom' (*sophia*) and 'practical wisdom' (*phronēsis*): wisdom concerns 'the most dignified things by nature' (1141b3),⁹ as opposed to practical wisdom, which is concerned with 'human matters' (1141b8–9).¹⁰ For Aristotle, wisdom is rather the theoretical 'knowledge of some [first] principles and causes'.¹¹ Also Xenocrates, head of Plato's Academy (d. 314 BCE, see Diogenes Laertius (on him, *infra*, p. 19) 4.14), another possible candidate, does not use the definition of wisdom as knowledge of human and divine matters.

⁷ See e.g. the index to DK s.v. σοφία.

⁸ According to Wilpert (1957) 156–8, and followed by Daiber (1980) 327, Aristotle in his *On Philosophy* would have used the definition of wisdom of knowledge as human and divine matters. But Philoponus (sixth century CE), *Commentary on Nichomachus' Introduction to Arithmetic* 1 α 8–46 Hoche, 402.1–4.12 Haase (Aristotle fr. 8 Ross, Aristocles of Messene vest. 1 Heiland, text 5 Chiesara), to which Wilpert and Daiber refer, does not give this definition, but rather offers an evolutionary account of the various conceptions of wisdom, ending, at ll. 41–2 Hoche, 404.6–7 Haase, with wisdom as the dealing with τὰ θεῖα καὶ ὑπερκόσμια καὶ ἀμετάβλητα παντελῶς, and defined as τὴν τοῦτων γνῶσιν κυριωτάτην σοφίαν ὀνόμασαν ('knowledge (*gnosis*) of divine and hypercosmic and unchangeable things'). Moreover, even this definition cannot be ascribed to Aristotle at all; only ll. 11–12 (εἰ καὶ φανότατά ἐστι κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτῶν οὐσίαν, ἡμῖν διὰ τὴν ἐπικειμένην τοῦ σώματος ἀγλὺν σκοτεινὰ δοκεῖ καὶ ἀμυδρά) can be traced back to Aristotle, that is, to his *Metaphysics* 993b7–11, explicitly referred to a little later on in ll. 33–40 Hoche. See further Jaeger (1934) 137 n. 1, Cherniss (1959) 38, Tarán (1966) 467–8, and (1969) 14 n. 70, Moraux (1984) 92 ff., Chiesara (2001) 58 n. 4 and esp. Haase (1965).

⁹ σοφία ἐστὶ καὶ ἐπιστήμη καὶ νοῦς τῶν τιμωτάτων τῇ φύσει.

¹⁰ Only in a later, Syrian, tradition is Aristotle credited with the definition of wisdom as the knowledge of human and divine things. See for references and further discussion Baumstark (1922) 220–6, Furlani (1926) 102, Daiber (1980) 328.

¹¹ *Metaphysics* 982a2 (cf. 982b9–10, 1003a26): ἡ σοφία περὶ τινος ἀρχῆς καὶ αἰτίας ἐστὶν ἐπιστήμη. On Aristotle's theoretical conception of wisdom as knowledge of the ultimate principles of what there is (i.e. what would come to be known as metaphysics) see e.g. Frede (2004) 20 (cf. 26): 'Wisdom ... thus includes knowledge of God, ... and deals with the divine.'